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Why Bodies Matter*

Mary Bucholtz

On a Friday evening in May 2014, Isla Vista, the student-dominated community adjacent to the University of California, Santa Barbara, where I am a professor, was suddenly ripped apart by a series of horrific acts of violence. I began drafting this commentary soon after these incidents took place, and as I reflected on language and materiality from the standpoint of linguistic anthropology, it was difficult to think about anything else. My profession had left me wholly unprepared to deal with the shock, the pain, the loss, the violation that the Santa Barbara community had experienced; academics generally avoid bringing our own emotions into our scholarly discourse. Yet my profession also offered me tools for thinking, alone and in conversation with others, about what had happened – the sense-making tools of theory and analysis.¹

Reduced to the official facts, one account of that evening goes like this (Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office 2015): in the early evening of May 23, 2014, a twenty-two-year-old man named Elliot Rodger stabbed to death his two roommates and a visiting friend in their shared apartment in Isla Vista. Some three hours later, Rodger uploaded a short video labeled "Retribution" to YouTube, laying out his murderous plans, and emailed his parents and thirty-two other people a 137-page document titled "My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger." He then left the apartment in his black BMW, armed with three semi-automatic handguns and more than four hundred rounds of ammunition. He drove to a nearby sorority house, where he planned to murder all the women inside; unable to get past the locked door, he shot three other women on the sidewalk, killing two and seriously injuring the third. Rodger's next stop was a convenience store, where he killed one man. He continued to careen through

* I am very grateful to the members of my Fall 2015 graduate class, Linguistics 232: Foundations of Sociocultural Linguistics, both for helping me work through the difficult ideas and emotions raised in the writing of this commentary and for their courage in collectively revisiting the darkest moment in our institution's history. Thanks are also due to the volume editors and an anonymous reviewer for their very helpful suggestions, which have greatly improved the text, and to Anne Charity Hudley, who offered valuable references and ideas. Finally, I thank Kira Hall for her deeply insightful discussions of embodiment in linguistic anthropology. The remaining weaknesses in this commentary are mine alone.

the crowded streets of Isla Vista, injuring thirteen other people both by gunfire and with his vehicle. Finally, wounded by the sheriff's deputies pursuing him, he fatally shot himself in the head before he could be taken into custody; his shooting rampage had taken only eight minutes.

The title of my commentary responds to that of Judith Butler's (1993) post-structuralist feminist classic, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* which theorizes materiality as a discursive effect (see also Ramanathan 2010). While Butler's argument importantly advances an understanding of the sexed and gendered body as more than a straightforward physical fact, and her theory of performativity sheds light on the material effects of language, her perspective is inadequate to capturing the multifaceted and culturally situated relationships between discourse and materiality, relationships that have been most fully explicated within linguistic anthropology (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012).

As the editors of this volume rightly point out in their introduction, language is not simply linked to materiality; it is, in itself, inherently material. They go on to trace the broad remit of a materialist view of language, from sensory experience to the structures and technologies of global capitalism. This inclusive perspective is a welcome incitement to linguistic anthropologists and other scholars concerned with language, culture, and society to expand their attention to phenomena that might be overlooked in a narrower framing. I would caution, however, that to prevent linguistic anthropology's copious conceptualization of materiality from dematerializing, as it were, into vague abstraction, it is necessary to anchor our theorizing of the materiality of language in the embodiment of language, that most enduring fact of human communication (Bucholtz and Hall 2016). Embodiment is not simply one aspect of materiality among others; it is the *sine qua non* of materiality – and of language. Even in technologically mediated spheres, language is always produced and perceived by physical bodies, via eyes, ears, hands, tongues, and lungs.

It is almost grotesquely obvious to point out that the events in Isla Vista were saturated with materiality, even well beyond the most glaring example – the murders that Rodger committed. Issues of materiality underlay both his actions and his motivations, as well as their representations in subsequent media reports and commentary. To begin with, his violent acts were carried out by means of human-made objects designed or used as weapons: knives, guns, and a motor vehicle. Yet these acts emerged from his earlier pattern of minor, almost pathetic assaults with decidedly nondeadly weapons: Rodger described in his written "manifesto" – as it was widely labeled – his odd habit of splashing beverages on affectionate couples and on women who did not show interest in him.

Rodger's communicative practices were also materially mediated; he expressed his feelings primarily via digital technologies, using online video and discussion sites as well as his word-processed manifesto as outlets for his rage and bitterness. Moreover, these texts revealed that Rodger was greatly concerned with the material trappings of capitalist success and that he sought to transcend his middle-class socioeconomic background. The child of financially struggling film industry parents, he resented growing up in the shadow of Hollywood's wealth and fame, and after his parents' divorce he was angry with his mother for not marrying a rich suitor. He viewed symbols of affluence such as his prized (used) BMW 328i luxury coupe, purchased by his mother as a gift to him, as the key to sexual conquest. He unsuccessfully played the lottery, hoping that by becoming a multimillionaire he could win the admiration and sexual experience he craved. Finally, materiality was evident after the killings in the way that Rodger was interpellated into medicalized discourses, via news reports that he was in therapy, rumors that he had Asperger syndrome, and amateur psychologists' speculative diagnoses ranging from narcissism to bipolar disorder (cf. Kang 2014).

But most fundamentally, Rodger's obsession with materiality was evident in his focus on racial, gendered, and sexualized embodiment. He was a self-identified "involuntary celibate" inspired by the highly misogynistic "men's rights movement"; he desired yet hated blonde women, valorized whiteness, and despised men of color as well as his own Asian heritage (he was of both Malaysian and white British descent). His digital rants featured blatant expressions of misogyny and racism, and at least some of the victims of his violence were targeted on the basis of race and gender: all three of the men he murdered in his apartment were Asian American, and he set out into Isla Vista afterward with the deliberate intention of killing women.

The material dimension of Rodger's crimes is thus abundantly clear, but the linguistic dimension is perhaps less so. Indeed, given the overwhelmingly material reality of mass murder, it may seem bizarre, and even trivializing, to link this atrocity to "mere" language. Yet in the ensuing hours, days, and weeks, as journalists and commentators on social media scrutinized every aspect of Rodger's actions and motivations, it emerged that his acts of violence were thoroughly entangled with acts of language. These included his hate-filled posts on websites variously focused on body building, sexual frustration, and pickup artists and their detractors; his encounters with local law enforcement in the months leading up to the attacks; his series of YouTube videos and his manifesto, which circulated online, in which he had meticulously documented his murderous plans and motives; his email message to his parents and acquaintances in the midst of his frenzy of violence; and his brief interactions with his intended and actual victims, some of which were reported by survivors.

Language was also crucial to members of the UC Santa Barbara campus community both during and after the attacks: campus members were sent emergency alerts by text and campus email, and many of us monitored developments via witnesses' posts to Twitter, the only information source quick enough to provide real-time updates as events rapidly unfolded. A makeshift graffiti wall memorializing Rodger's victims, constructed in the central part of campus soon after the murders, provided public space for written expressions of love, loss, and grief; a campus remembrance event offered additional opportunities for speeches, songs, and reflections. And most poignantly for me, in our class discussions in the days following the murders my undergraduate students referred to the killer, who was not a UCSB student and was not known to any of them, by his first name, Elliot – even this small humanizing act, so jarring to my ears, was a matter of language.

As a feminist with a political commitment to examining the workings of race, gender, and sexuality, and as a linguistic anthropologist with an analytic commitment to understanding the consequentiality of even the briefest of social actions and interactions, I continue to struggle to make sense of the mass murder that Elliot Rodger perpetrated, which is too easily labeled a “senseless” act of violence. But the starting point for understanding is clear: at some level it aligns with all-too-familiar discourses of bodies and embodiment. Whatever else can be said of Rodger's actions, they are indisputably and inescapably about bodies: those he found beautiful and those he found revolting, those who had sex and those who did not, those who were killed or injured, and those who dragged friends and strangers to safety. And they are equally about language: what the killer said and wrote, how he interacted online and face to face, and what may have been his last words, an unintelligible shout from his car to a young woman on the sidewalk, followed by a gunshot.

Thus Elliot Rodger's acts of violence – his shocking violation of the bodily integrity of other human beings – and the discourses that authorized these acts, at least in his own mind, force us to confront the specificity of embodiment and its intimate connection to language. Linguistic anthropologists unquestionably need big-picture theorizing that helps us trace the linguistic dimensions of economic and political processes across time and space. But to stay analytically grounded and empirically accountable, scholars must examine these processes in relation to the everyday embodied and discursive worlds of social actors. Taking a large-scale view of such worlds obscures the agency of individuals to bring about change – whether for good or ill – on the so-called small scale, in the lives of real people.

Even now, I do not feel ready – perhaps I will never feel ready – to offer a fully worked-out theoretical or analytic account of that summer evening, what led up to it, and what followed afterward. But such events push us to think

harder about the relationship between language and materiality and the roots of both in the human body.

NOTE

1 A longer version of this chapter appears on my website (<http://tinyurl.com/lj5tbtd>).

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